

ABOUT THE HISTORICAL SOURCES OF MOVSES KHORENATSI'S HISTORY

Kosyan Aram
Institute of Oriental Studies of NAS RA

In Armenological studies, both in Armenia and in abroad the history of the establishment of the Arshakid dynasty has been presented thoroughly. In this context the accession of Tiridates I, first Armenian Arshakid king, is elucidated in its full length due to detailed description of confrontation between the Parthian empire and Rome by Roman historians Tacitus and Dio Cassius, especially the journey to Rome where he received his crown from emperor Nero¹.

Tacitus² and Dio Cassius³ describe the wars between Parthia and Rome for the sovereignty over Armenia, the campaigns of Roman generals Corbulo and Petus, the treaty signed after the battle at Randeia and, finally, Tiridates' journey to Rome.

The next source is that of Movses Khorenatsi's "History of Armenia" where a special chapter is devoted to the rule of Tiridates⁴; here Tiridates appears as Vatarshak.

The person of Tiridates

Quite a few could be said about the person of Tiridates I before his accession to the throne of Armenia. All we know is that he was the third son of Gotarzes, king of Parthia who ruled several months (after Vologeses and Pakor)⁵. Only in the context of the Roman-Parthian confrontation for the overlordship of Armenia and especially in the passage describing his journey to Rome Dio Cassius tells about his priestly functions⁶. Tacitus mentions that even during the war between Rome and Parthia Tiridates was busy with his priestly functions⁷.

¹ The History of Armenian People (Aghayan Ts. P. et al.), Yerevan, 1971, pp. 730ff. (In Arm.); The History of Armenian People (Zhamkochyan H.G. et al.), Yerevan, 1975, pp.174ff. (in Arm.); Manandyan H., Studies, vol.1, Yerevan, 1977, pp. 320ff. (In Arm.); Manandyan H., Studies, vol. 2, Yerevan, 1978, pp. 9ff. (In Arm.), etc.

² Tacitus, The Annals, Book IV, London-Cambridge/Mass., 1962 (Loeb).

³ Dio Cassius, Dio's Roman History, London-New York, 1925 (Loeb), Book LXII 19-26, LXIII 1-7. The Armenian translation of the passage dealing with Tiridates see in Ancient Greek sources. A. Josephus Flavius, Dio Cassius (transl. by S.M. Krkyasharyan)(Foreign sources about Armenia and Armenians, vol. 9), Yerevan, 1976, pp. 200-206 (In Arm.).

⁴ Book II 2-8 (taking into account the language of our paper we cite the English translation of Khorenatsi's book).

⁵ According to Tacitus, Pakor was given a rule over Media (Tacitus, The Annals XV 2).

⁶ Some Armenian historians mention about the priestly functions of Tiridates (The History of Armenian People (Ts.P. Aghayan et al.), Yerevan, 1971, p.759, also in H. Manandyan, Studies, vol.1, p. 342).

⁷ Tacitus, Annals XV 24. In Armenological studies about Tiridates as being a Zoroastrian priest most complete information is contained in Russell J.R., Zoroastrianism in Armenia, Cambridge/Mass., 1987, p. 268. It should be mentioned that in elsewhere in studies published in Armenia this fact of Tiridates' person is either omitted or mentioned briefly, without any comments.

In this respect it will be useful to cite the passage from the study of Pliny⁸:

«The Magian Tiridates was at his court, having repaired thither, in token of our triumph over Armenia, accompanied by a train which cost dear to the provinces through which it passed. For the fact was, that he was unwilling to travel by water, it being a maxim with the adepts in this art that it is improper to spit into the sea or to profane that element by any other of the evacuations that are inseparable from the infirmities of human nature. He brought with him, too, several other Magi, and went so far as to initiate the emperor in the repasts of the craft; and yet the prince, for all he had bestowed a kingdom upon the stranger, found himself unable to receive at his hands, in return, this art».

The main source of the “History of Armenia” (Mar Abas Catina)

Among his main sources Movses Khorenatsi refers to a mission of Mar Abas Catina, an educated Assyrian, whom Tiridates (Vatashak in the “History”) has sent to his brother, the Parthian king Arshak (Vatash I = Vologeses) in order to make use of the state archive kept in the latter’s court. Khorenatsi describes that mission as follows:

«The latter [Vatashak], having ordered his own principality in a grand manner and established his reign, had a desire to know who and what sort of men had ruled over Armenia up to his time: had he succeeded to the throne of valiant men or of cowards? And finding a certain Syrian, Mar Abas Catina, a diligent man versed in Chaldaean and Greek, he sent him to his brother Arshak the Great with worth gifts, [asking him] to open for him the royal archives. ...

When Arshak the Great received the letter from the hands of Mar Abas Catina, with great alacrity he ordered the royal archives in Nineveh to be set before him, and he was equally happy that his brother, to whom he had entrusted half of his kingdom, had such thoughts. [Mar Abas Catina] examined all the books and found one in Greek on which there was, he says, the following caption.

This book which contains the authentic account of the ancients and ancestors, was translated at the command of Alexander from the Chaldaean language into Greek.

From this book Mar Abas Catina extracted only the reliable history of our own race and brought it to king Vatashak in Nisibis in both Greek and Syriac script. The personable and valiant Vatashak, expert at the bow, eloquent, and intelligent, received it and esteeming it as the foremost of his treasures, placed it in the palace, in safekeeping, with great care; and a part of it he ordered to be inscribed on a stele»⁹.

In Armenological tradition the episode of Mar Abas Catina has been subject of controversy.

Still in the XIX century a number of Armenian and foreign scholars had rejected the historicity of Khorenatsi’s account.

⁸ Pliny, *Natural History* (transl by J. Bostock and H.T. Riley), vol.V, London, Book XXX.6, p. 428 (“Magus ad eum Tiridates venerat”).

⁹ Thomson R. W., *Moses Khorenats’i, History of the Armenians*, revised edition, Ann Arbor, 2006, 79ff.

N. Emin wrote that hardly in Mesopotamian archives, located in Nineveh (as it is told by Khorenatsi) any information regarding the ancient Armenian patriarchs could have been extant. He suggested that Khorenatsi could use only local Armenian sources (mainly oral tradition)¹⁰. The same approach to the problem was demonstrated by G. Khalatyants¹¹, A.M. Garagashyan¹², H. Geltzer¹³ and others. R. Thomson, the editor of Khorenatsi's "History" in English also doubts the probability of Mar Abas Catina's mission¹⁴.

Several scholars had introduced a more balanced approach to the problem of Mar Abas Catina, trying to identify his sources in the ancient cuneiform texts and studies of Classical authors as well and prove the historicity of Mar Abas's source. One of the first attempts was demonstrated by H. Manandyan¹⁵. Later he was followed by G. Sarkisyan, whose thorough study of Khorenatsi's "History" gave him some clues to suggest the historicity of several episodes in his account¹⁶.

The study of S. Hmayakyan is also of special interest. The author refers to the well-known text of the Middle Assyrian king Tiglathpileser I (1114-1077 B.C.). According to the text, during the siege of the city of Kibsha (or Kibshuna) located near the Nibur mountain, the king ordered its population to extradite the 300 insurgent families residing there. S. Hmayakyan thought that here a direct link with the story of the patriarch Hayk who had fled from Babylonia towards the "country of Ararat" could be suggested¹⁷.

But even these authors were unable to prove the historicity of Mar Abas's mission, and in all studies the probability of the existence of Mesopotamian archives during the reign of Vologeses I remains "terra incognita".

Below we shall refer to a unique source which was not used by Armenologists, where an old Pahlavi text describes an undertaking similar to that told by Khorenatsi.

One of the chapters of Denkart, a fourth Book of Avesta, written in Pahlavi (Middle Persian)¹⁸ tells about the Askhanian (Parthian) king who had ordered to collect in all provinces of the Empire the information, both religious and historical, related to their

¹⁰ Emin N., *Old Armenian Epos*, Moscow, 1881, p. 10ff. (in Russian); Emin N., *Dynastic list of the Haykides*, Moscow, 1884, p.15 (In Russian).

¹¹ Khalatyants G., *Armenian Epos in the History of Armenia of Movses Khorenatsi*, Moscow, 1896, p. 106ff. (In Russian).

¹² Garagashyan A. M., *Critical history of Armenians*, Constantinople, 1880, p. 136ff. (in Arm.).

¹³ Geltzer H., *Short History of Armenians*, Vienna, 1897, p.5 (transl. into Armenian by Galemkyaryan).

¹⁴ Thomson R., *Moses Khorenats'i*, p. 53ff. ("The important point is that Moses' fathering of archival material relating to Armenia on the legendary Mar Abas is but a literary device", p. 55).

¹⁵ Manandyan H., *Studies*, vol.1, p.18ff.

¹⁶ Sargisyan G., *Pre-Mesropean Armenian historiography, Patmabanasirakan hands* (*Historical-Philological Journal*), 1969/1, pp. 124-126 (with references on earlier studies)(In Arm.); *The History of Armenia*, Yerevan, 1990, p. Xlf. (in Russian); «*The History of Armenia*» of Movses Khorenatsi, Yerevan, 1991, p. 11ff. (in Arm.).

¹⁷ Hmayakyan S., *The Legend of Hayk nahapet and the city of Kibsha in Nibur mountains*, *Patmabanasirakan Handes*, 1992/1, p. 125ff. (in Arm.).

¹⁸ This book was compiled in the IX-X centuries A.D. (Boyce M., *Textual sources for the study of Zoroastrianism*, Chicago, 1984, p. 4).

past, which might have escaped the ravages of Iskander (Alexander the Great), or been preserved in oral tradition.

«Valkhas⁵, descendant of Askan, in *each* district, just as he had come forth, ordered the careful preservation, *and* making of memoranda for the royal city (shatrô shahag), of the Avesta *and* Zand as it had purely come unto *them*, *and* also of whatever instruction (âmûkô-k), due to it, had remained written about, as well as deliverable by the tongue through a high-priest, in a scattered state in the country of Irân, owing to the ravages and devastation of Alexander and the cavalry and infantry of the Arûmans»¹⁹.

The identity of this king Valkhas (Balash in Persian) was discussed by various scholars of the past.

E. West, the editor of Denkart was inclined to identify him with Vologeses I, during whose reign had been made significant steps in order to strengthen the Parthian empire and Zoroastrianism in particular²⁰. This idea was supported later by N. Debevoise, who was relying on an interpretation of passages in the Vendidâd and the Dēnkart. He thinks that Vologeses (Arshak of Movses Khorenatsi - A.K.) may have been the ruler responsible for an early collection of scriptural texts which later were developed into the Avesta²¹.

Thus it appears that the Parthian king Vologeses I, the elder brother of Tiridates, has collected all written data regarding the history of the provinces of his empire. In that case it could be speculated that Tiridates may well have been aware of his undertaking. A desire to possess with sources regarding his own kingdom may force him to ask his brother for assistance.

If so, one can speculate further that Khorenatsi, regardless of his attitude towards the sources of his "History", was aware of the above-mentioned undertaking of Vologeses I. As to the mission of Mar Abas Catina, here any comment would be premature.

¹⁹ The Sacred Books of the East, vol. XXXVII, Pahlavi Texts, p. IV (translated by E. W. West), Oxford, 1892, p. 413, par. 24.

²⁰ Idem, p. 413, n. 5, citing Darmesteter L., The Sacred Books of the East, vol. IV; The Zend-Avesta, p. I, Oxford, 1880, p. XXXIVff.; the same approach holds H. Lewy (Lewy H., The Babylonian Background of the Kay Kâûs Legend, Archiv Orientalni 17, 1949, p. 31f.) and others (Bivar A.D.H., The Political History of Iran under the Arsacids, - In: Cambridge Ancient History of Iran, vol.I, 2006 [fourth printing], p. 85).

²¹ «Under this same ruler all of the scattered remains of the manuscript or oral traditions of the Avesta were ordered collected» (Debevoise N. C., A Political History of Parthia, Chicago, 1938, p. 196).